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AUTHOR Hydak, Michael G.
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ABSTRACT

The attention brought by Marshall McLuhan to our environment is perhaps his most general contribution to the language teacher. McLuhan often supports specific innovations in language instruction, including: (1) the emphasis on the spoken and heard aspects of a language; (2) the need for active student participation in learning; and (3) electronic aids in teaching. Media such as television and films have not been made to deliver their potential as educational aids, but others, such as the radio, tape recorder, and record player, have. Although the presence of some instructional aids may be commonplace in today's classroom, what is not commonplace yet is the ability to use the new media effectively. Teachers of second languages and cultures should use the power of electronic media to their advantage. (AM)

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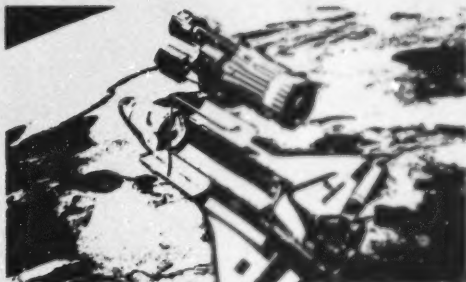
Marshall McLuhan and the Second-Language Teacher

by Michael G. Hydak
Houston, Texas

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"Electrical banana, goin' to be
the comin' craze."

(From a song by Donovan)

Marshall McLuhan has something to say to the language teacher. Often he writes about education, sometimes he mentions language,¹ and one of his interpreters sees electronic media language learning as fitting into the new pattern of the age.² *Fortune* magazine has called McLuhan "one of the major influences of our time", yet to others he is a publicity-seeking charlatan who has nothing new to say. His name pops up in learned journals, nonchalantly appears in the august pages of the *New Yorker*, and is dropped at all the better cocktail parties. Who is this enigma, and what has he done to cause so much controversy?

Marshall McLuhan received his Ph.D. in English literature from Cambridge University and was for a time a professor of English at St. Michael's College in Canada. He was also the director of the Center for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto. He is the author of *The Mechanical Bride*, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, *Understanding Media*, *The Medium is the Message* and sundry other articles in many of the major journals, newspapers and magazines. At Fordham University, he held a chair in the humanities, in the Communication Arts department, of course, for that is precisely what McLuhan is talking about - communication.

¹Marshall McLuhan and George B. Leonard, "The Future of Education: The Class of 1989," *Look*, 21 Feb. 1967, pp.23-25.

²John M. Culkin (Rev.), "School Man's Guide to Marshall McLuhan," *Saturday Review*, 18 Mar. 1967, p.72.

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According to Marshall McLuhan, the lines of communication in the twentieth century are vastly different from those of the nineteenth. The printed word is "out", as far as the future is concerned. The various methods of communication - or media - are either "hot", that is demanding relatively little participation, like the radio, or "cool", demanding a lot, like the telephone. As McLuhan puts it, "...the medium is the message' because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action."³ Since these media influence every part of our lives, how do they affect second-language learning?

It is precisely this attention that McLuhan brings to the environment that is his most general contribution to the language teacher. This latter has had for an objective the portrayal of another culture, and McLuhan is very conscious of how slippery cultures tend to be. Difficult to grasp, yet of great importance, they are "not passive wrappings but active processes."⁴ The history of language learning in the United States shows it (language learning) to be responsive to the needs and demands of the given time and society; French, for example, was popular at the time of the Revolution, because the patriots shared many philosophical and political views with French thinkers. Language learning will have to accommodate itself to what McLuhan sees as the hallmarks of our age. The new learner is the result of the new media, says McLuhan, and a new learner calls for a new kind of learning.

What new hallmarks is McLuhan talking about? Electric technology, Telstar, flight - all of these have been accepted by the modern North American, most easily, of course, by the young, those who are to be educated. McLuhan asks what the effect would have been if the Great Blackout of 1965 had continued for half a year. Television has become a way of life. McLuhan says that between 3,000 and 4,000 hours are spent in front of the TV before first grade; by the time of his high school graduation, the child has spent 10,800 hours in school, 15,000 with the television. There are over 65 million television sets in the United States, 45 million bathtubs. The number of radios is phenomenal. The TV station in New York that promises "News As It Happens" is not far from the mark. The news media are blamed for race riots and for the predicted disappearance of privacy by the year 2000. The entire nation mourned the death of President Kennedy via TV and saw "live" the death of Oswald.

³Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), p.24.

⁴McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p.viii.

McLuhan is performing an invaluable service in showing what awesome media the century possesses.

On a more detailed level, McLuhan often supports specific innovations in language learning. Just to cite the main ones: (1) the emphasis on the spoken and heard aspects of a language; (2) the need for active student participation in learning; and (3) the electronic aids in teaching.

There is a picture, in *The Medium is the Message*, of a man with an ear substituted for an eye. McLuhan points out that the ear is a medium, and a medium antecedent to that of the eye. It was in the fifteenth century with the advent of printing that the eye achieved a hegemony of the senses, and the world became primarily a visual one. Man, according to McLuhan, began to see the world and interpret experience along visual lines. It is his contention that we no longer live in a visual world, but in an acoustic one, made so by the use of electric machines, like television, the radio and films. This has resulted in our living in a global "village", a return to the pre-literate condition of man where language is fundamentally verbal. In speaking about the tape recorder, McLuhan says it is being used "in an attempt to retrain the auditory sense, to recapture the neglected rhythms of speech." ⁵

Secondly, McLuhan is firm in pointing out that the youth of today want roles in their educational process. He cites the fact that, where figures are available, the I.Q. of the high school drop-out is higher than that of his graduating counterpart. That other contemporary phenomenon, the teach-in, is also seen as a step towards real audience participation in the course of study. The detached observer, the non-involved, is a direct result of the linear world of print, of books, and of the Renaissance. McLuhan points out how a fifteenth-century Italian painting will have a vanishing point, and, therefore, a detached observer. Much in contrast to this, of course, is Pop Art which demands a spectator; a similar contemporary phenomenon is the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet whose novels and films impose the reader as the most important character, deciding the real course of the action. These trends are expressed by the young and must be taken into account. Certainly the best of language learning is just this - an attempt to use language as involvement in realistic situations and, as such, it is backed up beautifully by McLuhan, so much so that a longer passage from his work needs to be emphasized:

"To be involved means to be drawn in, to interact.

To go on interacting, the student must get somewhere.

⁵McLuhan, "The Future of Education," p.25.

In other words, the student and the learning environment (a person, a group of people, a book, a programmed course, an electric learning console or whatever) must respond to each other in a pleasing and purposeful interplay. When a situation of involvement is set up, the student finds it hard to drag himself away." ⁶

The opposite of this dyadic communication is a beautiful English speech delivered to monolingual Arabs; it is no longer a beautiful speech.

An apt cartoon in the *New Yorker* shows two suburban types seated before their television with the husband turning to the wife and murmuring, "When you consider television's awesome power to educate, aren't you glad it doesn't?" Such media as TV and films have not been made to deliver their potential as educational aids; others, such as the radio, tape recorder and record player, are commonplace in today's classroom. A good history of the use of these electric and audio-visual helps can be had in a report put out by UNESCO. ⁷ Developments in the field take place daily; not long ago the *New York Times* mentioned a new device, the "Multitrax" projection system which is a five-language motion picture, marketed at a very reasonable price and whose potential is enormous.

What is not commonplace in the classroom is the ability to use the new media effectively. McLuhan has written that "Resistance to change is understandable and perhaps unavoidable in an endeavor as complex as education, dealing as it does with human lives." ⁸ To give lectures on TV is to miss McLuhan's point entirely; this use of a new medium to portray the content of an old medium "points out mankind's common practice of driving *pêle-mêle* into the future with eyes fixed firmly on the rearview mirror." ⁹

The trip will be made, despite the driving. The new environment demands new approaches to teaching or, as McLuhan concurs, learning. The use of audio-visual or electric aids is inevitable. But although the driving may not be important in the long run, the driver always will. Media are, after all, extensions of man, and it

⁶McLuhan, "The Future of Education," p.24.

⁷*The Teaching of Modern Languages*, vol. X of *Problems in Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 1955).

⁸McLuhan, "The Future of Education," p.23.

⁹McLuhan, "The Future of Education," p.25.

is man who is primary, as McLuhan would be the first to admit. Perhaps the most balanced advice on the new techniques comes from Max Paul Feraud, a writer for the UNESCO report and the Inspector for Modern Language Teaching for the city of Paris:

"...for teaching purposes, audio-visual aids (and/or electrical ones) are neither a panacea nor a poison. Like all man's works, they are both good and bad, and it is our responsibility to use them to achieve better results with less effort. In this, they should be of assistance, because they appeal both to the eye... and to the ear... We, the teachers, will then have to appeal to the other types of memory and the cycle will be complete. Why, then, should we refuse the aid they offer?" ¹⁰

Or, as McLuhan himself put it, "new educational devices, though important, are not as central to tomorrow's schooling as are new roles for the student and teacher." ¹¹ Perhaps past crises in North American education as represented by the rebellion at Berkeley could have been at least partially avoided if this had been taken into account for today's education as well.

Afterthoughts, though, are not McLuhan's stock-in-trade, and he talks about the future in terms of vast systems of communication, linking the globe, making easily available within a few seconds all of mankind's accumulated knowledge and finally of a sort of technological "Pentecostal" happening. As teachers fortunately do not have to be seers, at least as of yet, they can content themselves with taking what is relevant to their situations from McLuhan, if it only be the realization that the student they are attempting to educate today is significantly different from the one they communicated with before television was invented. As Father John Culkin, an associate of McLuhan's, points out, "McLuhan didn't invent electricity or put kids in front of TV sets; he is merely trying to describe what's happening out there so it can be dealt with intelligently." ¹² The teacher of second language and culture, knowing the awesome power of electronic media to educate, will use that power to his advantage. ●

¹⁰*The Teaching of Modern Languages*, p.24.

¹¹McLuhan, "The Future of Education," p.24.

¹²Culkin, p.72.